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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001787

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER PM SAYS IT'S A CRIME NOT TO ELECT
NASSIB LAHOUD

REF: BEIRUT

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati, claiming, like many others, to have insider information on the Patriarch's list of presidential candidates, lamented the fact that the best candidate, Nassib Lahoud, would not be elected. He believed President Emile Lahoud would defy Hizballah's demand that he remain in office past the midnight November 23 end of his mandate, bowing instead to Syrian pressure to leave, though he did not rule out the possibility of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman being called in. Mikati cited fears about the role of Lebanon's Christians and about the impact on the economy, along with Syrian cooperation with the French initiative, as positive signs that a consensus would be reached. End summary.

PATRIARCH WILL PICK NON-POLITICIANS

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with former PM Najib Mikati on November 14 at his home in Verdun. Mikati had heard that the Patriarch probably would submit his list of six presidential candidates to Saad Hariri and Nassib Berri the next day. Commenting that the list would create more problems than it solves, Mikati opined that it probably would contain the three top contenders (Nassib Lahoud, Boutros Harb, and Michel Aoun), plus three "non-political" candidates like Demianos Kattar, Simon Karam, and Pierre Dakdash. Mikati said Hariri and Berri had reached a deal whereby Hariri would be the next prime minister, commenting that it was to both of their advantages to have a weak president.

3. (C) Joseph Torbey also was a possibility for the presidency, though Mikati did not believe his name was on the list. Michel Khoury was "excellent," but probably would never gain Hizballah's acceptance. Mikati ruled out Jean Obeid, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, Justice Minister Charles Rizk, and MP Robert Ghanem as too political. Since Berri would exclude Kattar, the presidency would come down to

either Karam or Dakkash, he concluded. Mikati repeatedly stressed that Nassib Lahoud was by far the best candidate: "It's a crime to compare him to the others!"

14. (C) They will succeed with electing a consensus president if the U.S. does not block it, Mikati said, noting that the latest conspiracy theory had the U.S. vetoing Robert Ghanem. Mikati said it would be easy to convince the Patriarch to add him to the list, but some thought it would be harder to convince the U.S. Berri would accept him, Mikati claimed, and had been able to convince Hizballah that he was the best candidate. The Ambassador said the U.S. was not vetoing Ghanem or any other candidate.

15. (C) The Ambassador noted that March 14 faces two bad options if the Patriarch's initiative fails: either no president is elected, and the Siniora cabinet takes on presidential powers, or March 14 proceeds with a half plus one vote. Mikati suggested that rather than let the Siniora government continue, President Emile Lahoud might finally declare it illegitimate (based on the lack of Shia representation since the November 2006 walkout of six opposition ministers) and appoint an interim government before he steps down. If this happens, he said, his support would go to Hariri "100 percent." But, he added, the opposition probably already has all of the ministers selected.

LAHOUD WILL LEAVE ON TIME,
BUT MAY ASK ARMY TO STEP IN

16. (C) Mikati called Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's November 11 Martyrs' Day speech a "second maneuver" following Hizballah's claim of conducting military maneuvers south of the Litani River (Comment: The alleged military maneuver was more hype than substance, aimed at

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rallying support for Hizballah. End comment.) Sidestepping the Ambassador's question as to whether the speech was a message to President Emile Lahoud to stay in office, Mikati said "someone else" already had sent Lahoud a stronger message. Though Lahoud was under serious pressure from Hizballah to remain, the Syrians were warning him not to do anything wrong and instead to let March 14 make a wrong move, he explained.

17. (C) Mikati said he had been told that Lahoud was preparing to leave the night of November 23rd and would probably call upon Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman to "take care of the nation," without specifying what that would entail. Mikati noted that in his November 13 statement, Sleiman said he would do his "national duty," as opposed to limiting his role to protecting March 14, as a recent newspaper article had claimed the U.S. was warning him to do.

RAY OF HOPE

18. (C) Mikati said three things gave him reason for hope. First, the Maronites realize what is at stake and are afraid. The Pope's November 11 message had been helpful, he said, as well as the statement from Michel Sleiman and Amine Gemayel following their meeting stressing the role of the Christians and warning that if they lose the presidency, they lose everything in Lebanon. March 14 also had played a useful role by using restraint in its response to Nasrallah's speech, thereby refusing to play Nasrallah's game.

19. (C) Second is the economy, he continued. Whether there is a void or a second government or March 14 proceeds with half plus one, the whole country will pay. But March 14 will pay more than March 8, he said, especially given the large numbers of March 14 members involved in Lebanon's banking sector. Therefore, there is an impetus for consensus.

Calling the central bank an "island" that would not be affected by the current crisis, Mikati nevertheless wonder aloud where Lebanon would get the \$4 billion needed to cover its foreign exchange deficit?

¶10. (C) The third reason for optimism, Mikati said, is the Syrians are starting to be cooperative by supporting the French initiative.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Mikati is the second half of the so-called "N & N" scenario, whereby Nassib Lahoud becomes president and Najib Mikati becomes prime minister, so we were not surprised to hear him laud Lahoud's credentials. However, his "insider information" is, we believe, incorrect. As often is the case when we see him, Mikati's presumed Syrian leanings were completely absent in this meeting.

FELTMAN